

TRADITIONALISM AS A WAY OF LIFE: THE SENSE OF HOME IN A SHANGHAI ALLEYWAY



NON ARKARAPRASERTKUL · HARVARD UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

Taking inspiration from major cities such as New York and Tokyo, the government of Shanghai has sought to convey a mixture of modernity and high culture through a blend of high-rise construction and historic preservation. City branding is a major part of Shanghai's urban development program. Apart from the building of multiple modern skyscrapers, the local government sees protection of distinctive "architectural artifacts" as essential to the branding of a city with global ambitions. The drive behind preservation, however, raises lingering questions regarding the residents currently living in these historic "monuments." Through ethnography, I show the lives of three different groups of residents whose sense of home is defined by completely different factors. "Traditionalism as a way of life" can be defined as practices that can only be understood within a highly contemporary framework, in which enacting or embodying "the past" has value in contemporary Chinese economic and globalized structures.

INTRODUCTION

"I wouldn't be able to imagine my wife and me being anywhere but here," said Teacher Hu when asked about their imagination of the future.

Teacher Hu (*Hu laoshi*) was born and has lived in Shanghai ever since he could remember. He and I got along with each other quite well, as I have been a regular visitor to his neighborhood for the past two years. Living in a traditional Shanghai alleyway neighborhood known as a *lilong* (literally "neighborhood lane"), Teacher Hu was, to me, a local historian who always enjoyed sharing all kinds of stories about the place in which he had lived for more than seven decades.

My fascination for his neighborhood began two years ago as I was searching the city looking for a site for my research on the gentrification of the inner city of Shanghai. Teacher Hu's neighborhood was one of those *lilong* neighborhoods that was not only in good physical condition, but

All photography has been provided kindly by Sue Anne Tay.

also had a unique architectural style. Most importantly, it had lively residents, with whom I could casually engage in conversation. Not only was the Teacher himself loquacious and outspoken, but he was also the liveliest among the residents. His *lilong* neighborhood occupied a block in the business district of Shanghai. The periphery of this block consisted of luxury stores facing pavements populated by tourists and local shoppers. Surprising to many (myself included), Teacher Hu's neighborhood was one of the few *lilong* that had yet to be demolished given the value of the prime business area in which it was located. It was my fascination of his *lilong* neighborhood as well as of Teacher Hu himself that kept bringing me back to see him there.

Since the economic reform in the early 1980s, Shanghai has been a city in flux. Shanghai's urban structure is always changing thanks to relentless political and economic forces that, since the reform, have shaped its patterns of urbanization.¹ Moreover, due to its status as China's most economically viable city (i.e., highest gross domestic product or GDP), Shanghai's cityscape today is changing at an unprecedented pace. Old and traditional buildings are constantly being replaced by new, modern buildings that are usually much higher in their spatial efficiency, allowing the city to service higher income residents who are attracted to the city by its dynamic tertiary industries. Like many big cities, lands in the city are reclaimed from the original residents and resold by the local government to real estate developers. The broadly defined "public good" is usually the key argument for the local government's use of eminent domain to reclaim valuable lands for higher income residents or businesses.²

Stories of residents fighting against the government to maintain their rights to receive adequate compensation are not new. In fact, as a researcher who has been working on the issues of housing rights and gentrification, I felt that I knew a great deal not only about the brutality of the local government's forced eviction practices.³ Many residents are already

looking to move elsewhere due to changes in lifestyle and employment, and seek to take advantage of the compensation money to help them make this move. Hence, although I usually felt sympathetic when I heard a story of people being displaced, another part of me attempted to maintain some level of objectivity because I did not really know the entire story.

Nevertheless, looking into Teacher Hu's unusually deep, expressive and sad eyes when hearing him say that he would not be able to imagine his life anywhere else but here, I could not help but feel sad and sympathetic about such an anticipated loss. The Teacher Hu I knew always smiled and laughed. His heavy pounding on my shoulder every time we saw each other always reminded me that he was healthy and lively. He always called home a small and narrow row house, half of which he and his wife rented out for extra income. "In a couple of years, if not less," said Teacher Hu, "the government will turn our houses into high-end shops just like the others." Teacher Hu and his wife were not naïve, as he knew quite well their destiny from many of the old neighbors who had been moving out from their 80-year-old neighborhood in the inner city to apartments in the suburbs. The situation he described is highly possible given that a new metro station and a shopping complex were in the process of construction right outside the wall of the community. "Perhaps, I'll join them in the suburbs," he said. But still, his deeply sad eyes told me that there was something about this place he called home that nothing else could replace. There seems to be a discrepancy between the quantitative goal of the state and the qualitative needs of the residents in their basic right to dwell in the city.⁴ The question in this essay is: how do we understand the sense of a place aspiring to become a global city? In this essay, I use ethnography to shed light on the meaning of home, and a sense of place, in the socio-spatial context of China's most economically dynamic city.

¹ Shahid Yusuf, Weiping Wu, and World Bank., *The dynamics of urban growth in three Chinese cities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); John R. Logan, ed. *Urban China in transition* (Oxford: Oxford : Blackwell Publishing, 2008).

² Michael Herzfeld, *Evicted from eternity : the restructuring of modern Rome* (Chicago, Ill. ; London: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Arjun Appadurai, "The Right to Participate in the Work of the Imagination," in *TransUrbanism* (Rotterdam: NAi Pub, 2002).

³ Mayra Gomez and Bret Thiele, "Housing Rights Are Human

Rights," *Human Rights* 32(2005); Qin Shao, *Shanghai gone : domicile and defiance in a Chinese megacity*, State and society in East Asia (2013); Hyun Bang Shin, "The Right to the City and Critical Reflections on China's Property Rights Activism," *Antipode* (2013).

⁴ David Harvey, "The right to the city," *New Left Review* 253(2008); Li Zhang, "The Right to the Entrepreneurial City in Reform-Era China," *China Review* 10, no. 1 (2010).

Trained as an architect, urban designer, and historian, Non Arkaraprasertkul is currently a PhD Candidate in Anthropology at Harvard University. He has published widely in the fields of urban studies, architectural history, and urban anthropology. His research interest lies in the crossroad of transdisciplinary research between architecture and the social sciences. In the spring of 2013, he served as Distinguished (Visiting) Gibbons Professor of Architecture at the University of South Florida (USF). Previously, he was a visiting lecturer in Architecture and Urban Design at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 2007–2008, and an adjunct professor in Modern Chinese History at Lesley University from 2012 to present. He has master's degrees in history, theory, criticism of architecture, and architecture and urban design from MIT, and Modern Chinese Studies from the University of Oxford.

HOUSING IN A GLOBAL CITY

Taking inspiration from major cities such as New York and Tokyo, the government of Shanghai has sought to convey a mixture of modernity and high culture through a blend of high-rise construction and historic preservation.⁵ City branding is a major part of Shanghai's urban development program.⁶ Apart from the building of multiple modern skyscrapers, the local government sees protection of distinctive "architectural artifacts" as essential to the branding of a city with global ambitions.⁷ The drive behind preservation, however, raises lingering questions regarding the residents currently living in these historic "monuments." As China rushes to modernize, one may wonder how the image of urban globalization affects the citizens whose lives the city government is ultimately seeking to improve.

At the heart of this issue are the traditional alleyway houses of Shanghai known as *lilong* (里弄). Literally meaning "neighborhood lane," the *lilong* are the legacies of Shanghai's Treaty Port era (1842-1946), representing the Chinese take on the British row house aesthetic. The *lilong* house was originally conceived by British developers as a British row house transplanted to Chinese soil to house a large number of Chinese laborers, which later became the city's dominant form of housing.⁸ The *lilong* also constituted the primary housing stock found in Shanghai up until the early 1980s, with multiple generations having occupied the same dwellings for a

hundred years or more.⁹ The dual nature of the *lilong* as both artifact and site for community places it at the center of various socio-political debates regarding China's attitude toward urban redevelopment at the state and local levels. The city and the state's image-conscious definition of civic improvement stands at odds with community leaders who equate such "improvement" with "state-led gentrification" inevitably leading to the displacement of current residents from their homes.

Just as the *lilong* can be both a monument and a home, I argue that housing strategies are not simply a matter of providing space to a certain number of people, but should take into account socio-cultural processes as well. Teacher Hu and his wife's story is a vivid example. It might well be the case that he would get to live in a larger and more convenient apartment if he agreed to move out of his *lilong* house, but only if we do not take into account their deep attachment to place.¹⁰ Teacher Hu and his wife had lived in the neighborhood for more than 40 years. They lived through the highs and lows of Shanghai under communism: throughout the hardship from devastating political campaigns to see the new Shanghai rising again in the early 1990s with the economic reform moving forward at full speed.

Located in physical space, housing occupies a key role in the organization of Chinese society. Not only is housing about the "physical" accommodation of the population, it also concerns the "social and moral" organization of family, lineage, marriage, and the possession and maintenance of property as a whole.¹¹ The rhetoric of historical preservation juxtaposed with the city's goal to project a global image represents a contradiction between ideology and city planning. The local governments of large cities hoping to achieve recognition from the international community using words like "historic preservation" and "development" often risk neglecting other important issues such as the provision of adequate housing.¹² These euphemistic buzzwords take a particularly dangerous tone when concerning the *lilong* and the existing communities there, as "historic preservation" spells the de-

⁵ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at large : cultural dimensions of globalization*, Public worlds v. 1 (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Saskia Sassen, *The global city : New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton, N.J. ; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁶ Brook Larmer, "Shanghai Dreams: China's global city tries to recapture the glories of its past—this time on its own terms.," National Geographic 2010; Albert Wing Tai Wai, "Place promotion and iconography in Shanghai's Xintiandi," *Habitat International* 30, no. 2 (2006); Fulong Wu, "Globalization, Place Promotion and Urban Development in Shanghai," *Journal of Urban Affairs* 25, no. 1 (2003).

⁷ Edward L. Glaeser, *Triumph of the city : how our greatest invention makes us richer, smarter, greener, healthier, and happier* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011); Sharon Zukin, *Landscapes of power : from Detroit to Disney World* (Berkeley ; Oxford : University of California Press, 1991).

⁸ Much research has been done on the historical aspect of this form of housing. For more detailed research on the historical and architectural aspects of the *lilong* houses and housing see Non Arkaraprasertkul, "Towards Shanghai's Urban Housing: Re-Defining Shanghai's Lilong" (paper presented at the The 6th China Urban Housing Conference, Beijing, China, 2007); Wenjun Ge, "Social congestion in Shanghai : an urban housing project designed on its sections" (S.M., 2008); Qian Guan, "Lilong Housing, A Traditional Settlement Form" (M.Arch Thesis, McGill University, 1996); Paul Harley Hammond, "Community Eclipse and Shanghai's Lilong" (University of Missouri-Columbia, 2006); D. Louise Morris, *Community or commodity? : a study of Lilong housing in Shanghai* (Centre for Human Settlements, School of Community and Regional Planning, University of British Columbia, 1994); Wan-Lin Tsai, "The Redevelopment and Preservation of Historic Lilong Housing in Shanghai" (M.S. Thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 2008).

⁹ Samuel Y. Liang, "Where the Courtyard Meets the Street: Spatial Culture of the Li Neighborhoods, Shanghai, 1870-1900," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 67, no. 4 (2008).

¹⁰ Tianshu Pan, "Place attachment, communal memory, and the moral underpinnings of gentrification in postreform Shanghai," in *Deep China : the moral life of the person, what anthropology and psychiatry tell us about China today*, ed. Arthur Kleinman, et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Bryna Goodman, *Native place, city, and nation : regional networks and identities in Shanghai, 1853-1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

¹¹ Julie Y. Chu, *Cosmologies of credit : transnational mobility and the politics of destination in China* (Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2010); Myron L. Cohen, *House united, house divided : the Chinese family in Taiwan*, Studies of the East Asian Institute (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976); Ronald G. Knapp, *China's living houses : folk beliefs, symbols, and household ornamentation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999).

¹² Michael Herzfeld, "Spatial Clensing: Monumental Vacuity and the Idea of the West," *Journal of Material Culture* 11, no. 1/2 (2006).

mise of the former, and “development” spells the demise of the latter.¹³

In this paper, I will present stories of three residents in the Tranquil Light neighborhood (a pseudonym), a *lilong* neighborhood in the upper quarter of Shanghai, which is surrounded by luxury stores and high-rise buildings. Earlier I sketched the picture of Tranquil Light in my narrative about Teacher Hu. The picture of this neighborhood will become more vivid as I narrate the stories of two other residents: Rob and Xiao Wang. I have come to know these three residents well after my multiple research trips to Shanghai from 2010 to 2014. Their lives – the original, the incoming, and the floating resident – are snapshots of housing situations in urban Shanghai today. I hope to show that even in the same neighborhood, their senses of place are defined by completely different factors.¹⁴

THE HOME OF TEACHER AND MRS. HU

“Everyone [in this community] calls me Teacher Hu,” he said. But he never told me where and what he used to teach. Since he was already retired and running a small grocery shop with his wife when my expatriate friend introduced me to him two years ago, I automatically assumed that before he retired (almost always at sixty years of age in the Chinese public school system) he was once a teacher – a title that, especially in a society rooted in Confucianism focusing on the respect for the elderly such as China, stayed with him for life. My expatriate friend who introduced me to him did not know better: “Everyone always calls him Teacher Hu – I don’t know why – he must have been a teacher,” he said.

A house played a central role for the vanishing traditional Chinese family. Not only was it physically important as a shelter for the multiple generations of the family, but also symbolic in that it represented the power of the leader of the household who is providing for the members in harmony. Analytically speaking, the spatial arrangement of the house represented the “inherent” hierarchy of a traditional



Chinese family. For instance, the head of the family (usually the oldest male) occupied the largest room at the most private part of the house (usually on the upper floor if the house had more than one story), whereas the other members and the wives that were married into the family stayed on the lower level. “Older sons are given preference over younger sons,” said Teacher Hu as he remembered quite well what it was like when his parents were still alive. Unlike a traditional Chinese courtyard house, a *lilong* house was narrow and small, but was still organized within a spatial constraint with a clear hierarchical division between the space for the head of the house and the rest of the household. As a son, Teacher Hu slept with his parents on the third level of the house. His father’s younger brothers and their relatives who came to Shanghai to find jobs stayed on the lower level. At one time, there were more than a dozen people in his house, which was originally built for half that number (three bedrooms).

“Life was not convenient as there was no bathroom inside the house,” said Teacher Hu. The way the house was constructed did not include an indoor plumbing system, thus before the pipelines were installed in the late 1970s, everyone had to go to a communal well to get water or buy it from the seller who would go door to door to deliver water. After the Communists took over the city from the Nationalists in the late 1940s, his neighborhood was transformed into a part of a large *danwei* (also known as work unit), or a place of employment to which the socialist workers were bound to for life and which in turn provided them with housing, child care, schools, clinics, shops, and other services. Before moving to the Tranquil Light neighborhood, Teacher Hu lived in his original house in the lower quarter of Shanghai, which was then being re-distributed to other families. In 1964, ten years after he moved into Tranquil Light, he was moved again, this

¹³ James Ferguson, *The anti-politics machine : “development,” depoliticization, and bureaucratic power in Lesotho* (Cambridge [England] ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

¹⁴ In this short piece, I can only do so much in providing the details of the full picture of Shanghai’s urban situation. For instance, while a full discussion of the nature of municipal preservation strategies may be helpful to the understanding of how the residents make use of the discourse around them to their own advantage, I have to restrain myself from further complicating the situation since the strategies themselves are tremendously varied and complex. They range from the modest infrastructural improvements without disrupting residential tenure patterns (the Tranquil Light’s case), to the use of eminent domain leading to a brutal eviction of the original residents and destruction of the existing structure followed by *lilong*-style modern luxury homes, and to quasi-legal commercial redevelopment such as the famous high-end retail district in the upper quarter of Shanghai. Some of these strategies are known to those who are well-read thanks to the recent writings on the issue, but are not playing a critical role in the ways in which the residents themselves think about their sense of place, which is the main focus of this paper.

time into his present home after he could prove to the local cadre in charge of the *danwei* that he and his wife needed a larger apartment (he did not say how such need was calculated). But he was given only a small bedroom, not the spacious one on the third floor, and a small elongated allotment space on the first floor of the building, which was usually used as a corridor leading to a stairwell communally used by the residents in the same unit.

In the early 1980s, Teacher Hu was sent by his *danwei*, specializing in industrial equipment quality control, to one of the Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in the southeastern coast of China to help set up a handful of factories needed to fuel its newly established labor intensive and export economy. He returned only a few years after because of his chronic health problem. His wife was also no longer employed because her *danwei* was dissolved. Their daughter was born a few years before Teacher Hu left Shanghai for work. When he returned, the family found themselves in a difficult situation, as the small monthly pension given to them by the local government was barely enough to support the couple, let alone their teenage daughter. The couple had to make extra income to support the family. Thus, Teacher and Mrs. Hu turned the elongated allotment space on the first floor – with five-foot-wide frontage and about 20-foot-deep (it was originally a corridor) – into a small grocery shop, selling all kinds of items but mainly cigarettes, liquors, and candies. When I met him for the first time in 2012, he had been running his small shop for more than twenty years.

As modern 24-7 convenient stores are ubiquitous in Shanghai, the couple did not really make money from their local grocery store business. However, it was precisely this business that gave them, according to Teacher Hu, “something to look forward to in the morning.” Having spent time sitting on a small wooden stool in front of the shop that he provided for people to come sit, drink tea, play cards, and smoke with him (although he no longer smoked because of his chronic disease), I felt that the shop was more a venue for conversation than anything else. In fact, many elderly with whom I spoke called his shop a “platform” (*pingtai*) to engage in all kinds of conversation, from the local politics in the district, to collective reminiscence, and gossiping about their neighbors and the new residents. People did not really come to buy anything, but to talk, share, and chat with Teacher Hu and his wife about politics, law, and reminiscing about all kinds of nostalgic stories (usually about Mao’s China). As the late afternoon arrived, children would bring their homework to the shop and gather around a small knee-height folding desk that Teacher Hu kept right by the entrance of the shop to give the children a communal place to do their homework.

SHANGHAI TRADITIONALISM

The post-high socialist China – some scholars call it “late-socialist China”¹⁵ – is a period of experimentation, rang-

¹⁵ Li Zhang and Aihwa Ong, eds., *Privatizing China : socialism from afar* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008).

ing from the highly geographically imbalanced “let some people get rich first” economic agenda to a dubious one child policy family planning program. Older generation residents like Teacher and Mrs. Hu basically received almost no support from the government and had to take care of themselves, but how? This treatment of retirees was increasingly the case after the market had replaced the state in the provision of basic social infrastructure such as housing and employment.¹⁶ While the economic reform program has dismantled the social safety net, which was a much-needed source of support for the elderly who could no longer work in a factory, the one child policy has disrupted traditional family relations. Teacher Hu recalled how, when he was young, he and all of his siblings were very close to their parents and grandparents as they were all living under the same roof taking care of each other.

Though the couple’s house and shop were both very small and dilapidated, the ownership of both essentially upheld their sense of dignity. This was because their social life revolved around the house and the shop. Every morning, I saw people, young and old, walking by Teacher and Mrs. Hu’s house and greeting them while they were watering their plants in the front of the house. Teacher Hu usually invited everyone to sit down with him for a tea, but really just so that he could have someone to chat with. What struck me in my last visit to Teacher and Mrs. Hu’s neighborhood was, what the urban theorist and activist Jane Jacobs calls “the sense of community.”¹⁷ With around a hundred residents living in the branch lane, that part of the neighborhood was small enough for all residents to know each other. Walking from a typical hectic commercial street of Shanghai where everyone was a stranger to each other into Teacher Hu’s neighborhood where everyone was a neighbor of one another, I felt that I was in a completely different Shanghai.

Having said that, there was another intriguing aspect of space-time continuum – the concept of time where there is simultaneity of past and future in an instantaneous present. Although time has changed, the sense of community I felt was rather similar to that in the close-knit alleyway house neighborhood that the historian Lu Hanchao portrayed in his classic historical ethnography *Beyond the Neon Light: Everyday Shanghai in the Early Twentieth Century*.¹⁸ *Lilong* neighborhoods then were like a dense collection of villages with residents rarely leaving the locale of their alleyway houses to go elsewhere. Older residents like Teacher and Mrs. Hu did not travel outside the neighborhood, except when they had to go out to buy goods to sell in their shop. This tie to their locale, in turn, created a strong sense of belonging, lo-

¹⁶ Dorothy J. Solinger, *Contesting citizenship in urban China : peasant migrants, the state, and the logic of the market*, Studies of the East Asian Institute, Columbia University (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

¹⁷ Jane Jacobs, *The death and life of great American cities* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books in association with Jonathan Cape, 1964).

¹⁸ Hanchao Lu, *Beyond the neon lights : everyday Shanghai in the early twentieth century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

cal moral world, and place attachment among the residents.¹⁹ When asked about his friends who had moved elsewhere and whether or not he would go out and see them in their new apartments, he replied: “Why would I go out to see them... they all come here from time to time – I know they all miss our neighborhood.”

There is a critical point to be made here about this spatial sense of the past. Rhetorically speaking, one might say that when in the neighborhood, one feels as if one were “going back in time,” moving away from the chaos of modern life into the local communal world where everyone knows and helps each other. As I have argued elsewhere, this type of romanticization is, in fact, a common attitude among historians of Shanghai, overlooking many other issues such as conflicts, violence, and the health hazards resulting from living in an unsafe environment of a rundown structure.²⁰ It is often the historians, architects, and planners – the outsiders – who paint the picture of a romantic urban place due to the nature of their archival research methodologies that seem to accentuate certain aspects of the past. This particular emphasis of the selected portion of the past, or what the anthropologist Tianshu Pan calls “Shanghai nostalgia,”²¹ is a doubled-edged sword. On the one hand, it documents some of the important aspects of the past that would otherwise be forgotten. On the other hand, this romanticization comes in handy for the local government’s efforts to stress its cultural capital in the effort to make Shanghai a global city.²² As a result, the government made a few preservation programs that only focus on the preservation of the physical structure of the “romantic neighborhoods” without caring for the residents living in them. In fact, the use of Shanghai nostalgia usually results in state-led gentrification of the neighborhood. Thus, I had always found suspiciously rosy historical accounts questionable if not misleading, and thought that the discourse of nostalgic sentiment did more harm than good to the original residents living in the neighborhood.

Teacher Hu emphasized this romantic past, especially when speaking about the future of his neighborhood. “There is no place like this...we maintain the tradition of the community,” he said, pointing out the stark contrast between his neighborhood and a typical community living in high-rise

towers. For more than a decade, he always wore the same clothes. He always got up early to water his plants in front of the house, sat in front of his shop talking to his friends and neighbors during the day, and resumed the role of a “homework teacher” for the children in the neighborhood from late afternoon to the early evening. This might be the reason why people still called him teacher despite the fact that he might not have had been a teacher at all. That said, as noted by the anthropologist Andrew Kipnis, after the 1980s the term “teacher” (*laoshi*) has become a generic term of respect, replacing the term “comrade” (*tongzhi*) used in the high communist period (1949 – 1976).²³ According to Kipnis, the term “teacher” can also be used to address people one does not recognize, especially when asking for assistance from a stranger (the de facto reason why I call him Teacher Hu). Both of these reasons probably play a role in how the community recognized him as a respectable figure in the neighborhood. This homework teacher role had diminished greatly because most of the kids in the neighborhood preferred to use the internet to help them with their homework. Once the sun had set, he would be sitting outside of the house, sometimes working on his “mini project” such as building a wooden chair on demand or fixing small electrical appliances for his friends and neighbors, sometimes just reminiscing about his good old days to anyone who walked by (including me). He had never wanted to change this daily routine and refused all forms of technology, including a computer, or even a calculator. (I have been keeping in touch with him through writing letters.) He only had a small frequency radio that he listened to every morning (of course, he always listened to traditional/classical Chinese music). While one could see the Teacher as an old man who was living in the past, one could also see his lifestyle as a survival strategy, an important point which I will further elaborate. Teacher and Mrs. Hu were not the only ones reenacting the lifestyle of the past times as a statement in support of the importance of their lifestyle. In other words, their daily enactments of the unchanging past/present have political potential. They represent the ways in which residents themselves become implicated in the state’s projects of traditionalism.

According to the anthropologist Theodore C. Bestor, *traditionalism*, in this sense, is a collective discourse of the present in support of the past that particular members of an urban community use to create meanings vis-à-vis social forms around which people organize their lives.²⁴ For instance, in the neighborhood of *Miyamoto-cho* where Bestor conducted the study of social organization of an ordinary urban neighborhood in the lower quarter of Tokyo, older members of the neighborhood used the past as a tool for the present. Rituals and certain idealized forms of traditional events and exchanges were maintained by the group of people who used them

¹⁹ Arthur Kleinman, *What really matters : living a moral life amidst uncertainty and danger* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

²⁰ Non Arkaraprasertkul, “Urbanization and Housing: Socio-Spatial Conflicts over Urban Space in Contemporary Shanghai,” in *Aspects of Urbanization in China: Shanghai, Hong Kong, Guangzhou*, ed. G. Byrne Bracken, IIAS Series (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012).

²¹ Tianshu Pan, “Historical Memory, Community-Building and Place-Making in Neighborhood Shanghai,” in *Restructuring the Chinese City: Changing Society, Economy, and Space*, ed. Laurence J.C. Ma and Fulong Wu (London: Routledge, 2005).

²² Fulong Wu and Shenjing He, “Property-Led Redevelopment in Post-Reform China: A Case Study of Xintiandi Redevelopment Project in Shanghai,” *Journal of Urban Affairs* 27, no. 1 (2005); Albert Wing Tai Wai, “Place promotion and iconography in Shanghai’s Xintiandi,” *Habitat International* 30, no. 2 (2006).

²³ Andrew B. Kipnis, *Governing educational desire : culture, politics, and schooling in China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

²⁴ Theodore C. Bestor, *Neighborhood Tokyo* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford, Calif : Stanford University Press, 1989).

strategically to position the neighborhood in the context of the city's fast-pace urbanization. In the Tranquil Light neighborhood, while the low and middle income residents were using history as a way of claiming the importance of their neighborhoods as "heritage," in contrast to *Miyamoto-cho*, residents did not try to harken back to historical rituals or events.

Many seniors in the neighborhood and a few middle age residents were also important actors in this process of maintaining a "traditional" lifestyle, or what the geographer Fulong Wu calls the process of "place-promotion."²⁵ There are many ways to "perform" a place, but in the case of the Tranquil Light, we might say that it was the traditionalistic place-promotion that defined the character of the neighborhood. In urban China, although there is neither an official neighborhood nor homeowner association with actual political or financial power to instigate change, the informal gathering group among the senior residents is what plays an important role in building personal relationships among the residents and between the state at the local level and the members of the community. The political scientist Benjamin L. Read argues that a form of "administrative grassroots engagement," or the involvement of the state in local community life through the state's sponsoring of networks and organizations at the community level, helps to empower the society.²⁶ It seems to be the case that this traditionalistic place promotion was acceptable to state actors, as it neither posed financial burden nor political risk. In fact, the discourse of maintaining the traditional lifestyle has thus far supported the state's policy on urban conservation.

As in the case of Teacher and his wife, the close proximity of the houses to each other and the architecture of the lanes between the houses reinforced the sense of neighborly feeling or conduct.²⁷ However, what goes against the argument to save the community using the edifice that both the local government and the residents commonly agreed to preserve is the inevitable physical dilapidation of the *lilong* houses themselves. While the residents want to protect their neighborhood (since it does not only mean the protection of their lifestyle but also their survival) they also have to tolerate the ever-worsening condition of a century-old building. On the one hand, the discourse of traditionalism helped to maintain the lifestyles of the older residents such as Teacher and Mrs. Hu and to re-assure the "cultural importance" of his

neighborhood. On the other hand, it was this discourse that backfired on them because they had to live in this "traditionally dilapidated" condition. Anything new they brought into the neighborhood, including amenities for the convenience of life, would provide an excuse for the local government to come in and re-evaluate their ability to live in a historical neighborhood. This negotiation was something Teacher Hu constantly talked about. As the sociologist Louis Wirth notes in his classic essay in urban sociology, "Urbanism as a Way of Life," or the way in which the personal familial relationship is replaced by a mediated transaction of a large city, we may understand this aspect of traditionalism as "traditionalism as a way of life."²⁸

ROB: TRADITIONALISM FOR SALE

I was introduced to Teacher Hu through Rob, a 28-year-old American expatriate whom I came to know through a former student of mine who was working in Shanghai. Rob and Teacher Hu got to know each other from the first day Rob moved into the Tranquil Light. "This neighborhood is small...we know right away when someone is moving in," said Teacher Hu. Both Rob and Teacher Hu were living in the same branch lane and seeing each other on a regular basis since the frontage of Teacher Hu's shop was opposite to the door leading to Rob's room on the top floor of the building. He had a bachelor's degree from a college in the US. He moved to Shanghai around three years ago. Like many educated Americans who speak "Standard American English," he made a living by teaching English to school kids in the business district that was in a walking distance from his *lilong* apartment, earning enough to rent a rather spacious apartment about four times the size of Teacher and Mrs. Hu's. Rob was attracted to the *lilong* neighborhood by historical accounts he read about Shanghai. In fact, he read one of my earlier writings on the romance of the *lilong* neighborhood and wanted to try to live in one ever since!

It was the "connection with the past" that inspired Rob to rent a room in a renovated *lilong* house that the original residents revamped to specifically rent out to foreigners in this neighborhood, instead of a cheaper modern room in a high-rise building. Unlike Teacher Hu's apartment, which was dense, packed and dark because of the solid walls on both sides of the house that were put up to divide up the space for other extra renters, Rob's apartment was bright, clean, and spacious – changed to be more "modern." Unlike Teacher Hu's house, which looked like it had been frozen in time for more than half a century, Rob's apartment was equipped with broadband high-speed Internet, air-conditioner, and a flat screen TV.

Rob enjoyed living there, to the point that, when getting introduced to a new friend, colleague, or business collaborator, his first line had become "I live in an old *lilong* house in the Tranquil Light." He never openly accepted that it was

²⁵ Fulong Wu, "Globalization, Place Promotion and Urban Development in Shanghai," *Journal of Urban Affairs* 25, no. 1 (2003).

²⁶ Benjamin L. Read, "Democratizing the Neighbourhood? New Private Housing and Home-Owner Self-Organization in Urban China," *The China Journal*, no. 49 (2003). And see also Jiang-gang Zhu, "Between the family and the state: An ethnography of the civil associations and community movements in a Shanghai *lilong* neighborhood" (The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2002); Tianshu Pan, "Neighborhood Shanghai: Community building in Five Mile Bridge" (PhD Thesis, Harvard University, 2002).

²⁷ As also explored in Deborah Pellow, "No place to live, no place to love: Coping in Shanghai," in *Urban anthropology in China*, ed. Gregory Eliyu Guldin and Aidan Southall (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 1993).

²⁸ Louis Wirth, "Urbanism as a Way of Life," *American Journal of Sociology* 44, no. 1 (1938).



this “symbolic value” of the place that was most important to him, along with its central location which made it convenient for him to walk or bike to work. He mentioned that he was about to extend the contract to stay there for another year, and his partner might also move in with him. Rob enjoyed both the privacy he got from this top floor apartment, and all the attention from the children and other residents who wanted to speak to a “white foreigner” (*laowai* or *bairen*). In fact, Rob was not the only foreigner in the Tranquil Light. He was among dozens of foreigners living in other lanes. When I asked Teacher Hu what he thought about Rob’s romantic attitude toward his neighborhood, he replied, “See...even foreigners want to live here!”

At any given time, there were usually about 10-15 apartments ranging from RMB3,000 – RMB5,000 per month (US\$428 – US\$700) available “exclusively for foreigners” to rent out. These rooms were renovated by the original residents, who themselves had moved somewhere else, usually to live with their children’s families. A local senior resident was asked by these residents to put up a sign on the community’s board whenever there was a room available. This same senior resident was the one who had the key to all the available rooms, as his job was also to show the interested renters the rooms. He received a small commission whenever someone decided to rent a room, which was available for both a short (two weeks to three months) or long period of time (three months to one year). When I asked him why these rooms were “exclusively for foreigners,” he replied with a chuckle: “No Chinese would want to live in an old house like this...besides, for RMB3,000, they could live in a decent high-rise apartment!”

Rob did complain from time to time that there was no hot water or the water pressure was too low when he needed it. Besides, the water toilet did clog from time to time, as there was only so much infrastructural improvement that

could be done to a century-old house. When I asked Rob whether he knew that he could live in a modern high-rise apartment for the premium price he paid for his *lilong* apartment, he replied, “of course I know...but this is a once-in-a-lifetime experience...I am going to have a lot of stories to tell after these years in Shanghai.” Here we see another form of traditionalism, which benefited both the residents and the foreign renter. Rob was attracted by the “façade” of an authentic Shanghai life, which he believed to be the only way to access the exotic tradition.²⁹ His upbringing might have influenced his decision to live there. Yet, among dozens of foreigners who lived in the Tranquil Light who also knew each other, it seemed to be that the excitement of living in a traditional Chinese house with modern amenities was what got them sold.

The Tranquil Light’s neighborhood committee had little role in a community development, thus it did not have the authority to orchestrate the marketization of the neighborhood in this way. It was the residents themselves who had made a careful observation of other gentrified *lilong* neighborhoods in the city and then adopted a similar strategy to attract the target customers. One of the first foreigners who lived in the neighborhood from 2009 – 2010 told me that she was introduced to this community by a Shanghainese friend who was looking for someone to rent out her room, as she was moving in with her husband. Back then the rent was not very high since the condition of the room was almost hazardous, and there was a rumor that the neighborhood might be torn down to make way for high-rise buildings. Apart from spending her own money to refurbish the room herself, she also had to adjust her lifestyle to fit that of the residents of the community. For instance, she had to learn to live with a thin wall through which she could listen to the TV program being watched next door, with a “quasi-shared” bathroom (meaning it was her bathroom but anyone in the building could also use it), and so on. But after making several adjustments, she found herself to be living in a “dream apartment,” according to her. The success of her story went viral in the social media among expatriates, which led to a staggering interest in the neighborhood. Since the Tranquil Light was a historical neighborhood, it also received direct benefit from the “Better City, Better Life” city beautification campaign of the local government to prepare the city for the Shanghai Expo in 2010. The Tranquil Light basically received a series of free face-lifts and refurbishings from the local government, so that it would look presentable to the eyes of the record number of 73 million visitors. The neighborhood also benefited from the presence of the foreigners, as Teacher Hu often implied, since it reinforced the claim about the importance of the neighborhood to both the outsiders and the local government. In what Herzfeld calls “global hierarchy of value,”³⁰ “the westerner’s

²⁹ Similar to the authenticity discourse and practice that the anthropologist David Grazian shows. See David Grazian, *Blue Chicago: the search for authenticity in urban blues clubs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

³⁰ Michael Herzfeld, *The body impolitic: artisans and artifice in the*

taste” represents the universal value –in this case, through the discourse of heritage conservation. Moreover, the local government also operated a dual-track evaluation of *lilong* houses: while the original residents had to live in the houses in their original conditions, the foreigners were allowed to modify their apartments to their taste and need. The sense of place for Rob was the sense of being part of tradition, though only superficially.

XIAO WANG: “TRADITIONALLY, EVERYONE WAS EQUALLY POOR.”

Finally, there was also Xiao Wang, a 25-year-old master’s degree graduate from a university in Shanghai who had a part-time job working in a restaurant. She was not originally from Shanghai but from another province. Xiao Wang rented a room in the Tranquil Light. Her “room on the stair flight” (*tingzijian*) was not originally a room but a space used as storage between two floors, which was later turned into a room. It was about three-fourths the size of Teacher Hu’s bedroom, but it basically had everything that she would need, including a study desk, a wooden box in which she stored belongings, and a tiny bed. Because she still relied on her parents’ financial support, she had to be economical about the living expense. Unlike Teacher Hu or Rob, who lived in the Tranquil Light because they wanted to, she lived there because it was the only choice: it was the only affordable place in the city at a distance that she could walk to work in order to save money. Like many university graduates in China today, she aspired to become successful in life, thus she was keen to learn English, and my offer to help her with her English was how we got to know each other. Xiao Wang was not very close to Teacher Hu.

I visited her room a few times. Because it was so small (though it did have a tiny window) it was usually dark. The door to Xiao Wang’s room was also very small. I felt as if I was walking into a cave when I walked into her room. A small desk that was attached to the wall was where she did everything from studying to eating dinner, and to watching television shows online. A small plastic closet next to the desk was where everything else went. She turned a bunk space supported by a doubled-cross wooden lintel into a personal storage space, where she kept all of the books, packs of instant noodles, energy drinks, as well as other things. Visiting Xiao Wang’s room donned on me an entirely different living experience and meaning of home. Teacher Hu’s place may be small and dark, but at least he had the shop that was completely open to the lane downstairs where he basically did everything else except for sleeping. Although Teacher Hu had to come downstairs every morning to empty his urine collector (since there was no bathroom on his floor and he was too old to walk down to the first floor every time he needed to use the bathroom), I could still imagine myself living in his

global hierarchy of value, Artisans and artifice in the global hierarchy of value (Chicago ; London: Chicago ; London : University of Chicago Press, 2004).



place. I, however, could not imagine myself in Xiao Wang’s room in any way. There was a window but she barely opened it because of the noise and mosquitos in the summer, and cold wind in the winter, which meant lack of sunlight as well as ventilation, leading to poor indoor air quality.

“What choices do I have – none,” said Xiao Wang. “But, it’s OK, *traditionally*, everyone was equally poor, so why shy away from it?” Despite her strong moral position, I sensed that there was more to the story:

You just have to get used to it... I had a room a bit bigger than this size at my house in my hometown, but there were a couple of windows opening to a small park, which was nice. This room was the only one that I could afford. I’d tell people that I have a room in downtown Shanghai! (*laughing*)... but no, I wouldn’t bring my loved one here... but admit it, it is not that bad. It’s close to the university and everything.

As I have already graduated I could no longer live in the university’s housing, and this place is the cheapest one I could get in the city. I could live in the suburbs and sit on the train for an hour to get to the city, but why would I do that? It’s not convenient, but where else is convenient? I don’t have money. Here, at least I am in the heart of the city. People don’t need to know that I am living here. They only need to know that I work in the city! Trust me, if you live here for a month you’ll get used to it just like me!

Characterized as migrant workers seeking temporary employment, the *liudongrenkou* (literally “floating population”) have become an integral source of cheap labor since China’s “coming out” period in the early 1980s, despite the unwillingness of the local governing bodies to recognize them

as legitimate (if temporary) residents.³¹ The legacy of the high-socialist era household registration system or *hukou* labels each citizen either as rural or urban, tying each citizen to their place of birth if they want the benefits of healthcare and education. Xiao Wang was from another part of China and so did not have a Shanghai *hukou*. So, in Shanghai, she was only a half citizen. Additionally, China's post-1980s economic reform program shifted the role of supplying welfare housing from the state to private developers – ultimately providing the members of the *liudongrenkou* limited access to public housing, and consequently pushing them to the outskirts of the city.

Here I employ ethnography as a way to shed light on the construction of the *liudongrenkou* as a sociocultural category, and to provide an account of the special challenges faced by this class of worker in China. For a *liudongrenkou* such as Xiao Wang, a sense of a home was all about basic needs. She neither wanted to engage in any of the neighborhood activities, nor wanted to help promote traditionalism to the outsiders because, in her own words, “it doesn't matter... I'll move when I find a cheaper place...there is no home for me in this city.” Xiao Wang spent about 16 to 20 hours a day outside of the room. Apart from working part-time, she hung out at the workplace or elsewhere in the city. “I only come back to sleep...you know, you see my room...it's a hole...it's not the kind of space you want to be in very much (*laughing*).” In her situation, the way in which the concept of home analytically works for my ethnography is rooted in the financial and socio-economic constraints with which a *liudongrenkou* has to deal. For the more than five million *liudongrenkou* in Shanghai who are originally from other parts of China traveling to the big city by themselves with the goal to send money home, a house is merely a space that accommodates the physical needs of a person. I got to know Xiao Wang quite well through many interviews and interactions, most of the time in her room. On the one hand, Xiao Wang almost always referred to her own background in another city where “everybody was poor” (*dajia dou hen qiong*), and that was the so-called “tradition” to her. On the other hand, from what her mother, whom I met when she came up to Shanghai to help her move out, told me, Xiao Wang's life was not that bad when she was a child. When I asked her about the condition of poverty that she always referred to, her mother could not really make sense of it: “Maybe it's something that Xiao Wang's father encountered when he was sent to the countryside, but that's not what she had experienced directly. Xiao Wang was born when the family was pretty well-off already.”

And that was the story: Xiao Wang in fact confessed to me that she had not really been in contact with the referred condition of poverty directly, but she thought that it was an “imagined past” that would make sense, and could help to take the pressure of having to maintain the “face” (*mianzi*), given her status as a non-citizen in Shanghai. I was interested

in her story not just because it helped to paint a realistic picture of straitened living circumstances, but also because of the way in which an aspect from the past – whether real or imagined – was used as a coping mechanism to deal with the present.

The twists of the plot here are as follows: even though I did not think I could live in Xiao Wang's place, I ended up renting her room after she moved out, as she eventually found a place across town which she could afford with just a little bit more money than she used to pay for the room on the stair flight. Since she is the only child, her family could pull together family's resources to support her. Xiao Wang's family put in the initial down payment for her, now a graduate with a job at a securities company, to pay the mortgage. I would end up staying in Xiao Wang's former room for the next 10 months of my research in Shanghai. Xiao Wang was right: it only took me a month to get used to it.

CONCLUSION

While I would be inclined to think that the traditional system of lineage and kinship still matters in modern China, my ethnography has shown that economic reforms have altered the social foundation of an urban neighborhood. I spent months in the Tranquil Light, speaking to a handful of people and became very close to these three people. Unlike both Teacher Hu and Rob, Xiao Wang did not have any choice but to accept the home that her economic status allowed her to afford. Although all the houses looked the same in the Tranquil Light, it was a highly class-oriented neighborhood. While older residents were living in the old part of the *lilong* houses often at the ground level, foreigners who paid premium rents were living on the renovated higher floors. A floating population of unskilled laborers rented a space in a room “within a room” – by this I mean a room that was divided several times to house up to four times the number of original residents designated to occupy that room. For instance, Xiao Wang was living in a portion of a room that was not meant to be inhabited by human beings.

This situation illustrates how the discourse of history is often put to the service of sentimentalism – evoking a yearning for the past.³² In other words, the notion of “significant architectural heritage” becomes a political tool in the city of Shanghai with the implication that it represents the benign efforts of the state to preserve the history of the city for both the residents and the visitors. The preservation of the *lilong* façade symbolizes the efforts of ostensibly caring local authorities to maintain a dialogue between Shanghai's past and present. This preservation process overlooks many problems, ranging from macro-planning problems such as inadequate housing units for the working class and migrants, to urban infrastructural issues such as mounting spatial congestion, as well as safety and health hazards. Armed with this discourse of historic preservation, the local government utilizes the *lilong* in its city branding strategies, especially through gentri-

³¹ Li Zhang, *Strangers in the city: reconfigurations of space, power, and social networks within China's floating population* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001).

³² Herzfeld, *The Body*.

fication and the use of eminent domain.

Hence, many residents are living in a state of uncertainty, in constant fear of eviction, and in a seemingly unending process of negotiation with various government agents to receive compensation for the foreseeable loss of their homes. In order to maintain their right to dwell in the houses, the local residents have adopted survival, monitoring, and negotiating techniques, which include forming a neighborhood association, initiating campaigns to inform the public about the importance of their neighborhoods, and utilizing the image of a successful gentrified neighborhood in order to seem supportive of the state's "global city" discourse. Residents express their resistance by various means, utilizing all available channels of information. For instance, as in the case of the Tranquil Light, some neighborhoods rent out space to foreigners and use their presence to claim the neighborhoods' cultural capital. These dynamic interactions among various actors (i.e., local governmental officials, historians and journalists, developers, architects and planners, and residents) from multiple levels of society (i.e., urban planning vis-à-vis state policy, community, and individual citizens) are played out in the physical space of *lilong* neighborhoods.

In previous studies of *lilong* communities, many scholars have seemed to focus on the architecture of the *lilong* houses and neighborhoods, which is fascinating for a variety of reasons. In my ethnography, I still think that the architecture of the *lilong* houses and neighborhoods matters – either because the residents have to cope with the dilapidated condition as in the case of Teacher Hu and Xiao Wang, or because the architecture itself symbolizes the romance of the neighborhood life, as in the case of Rob. In the current socio-political context of China, the residents' struggle and resistance against the local government, whose goal is to maximize profits from existing land property, define the residents' individual sense of home. In this ethnographic paper, I have shown the lives of three different groups of residents: the original, the incoming, and the floating resident, whose sense of home is defined by completely different factors. On the one hand, we see Teacher Hu, who was not "living in the past." In fact, his practices can only be understood within a highly

contemporary framework, in which enacting or embodying "the past" has value in contemporary Chinese economic and globalized structures. On the other hand, Rob was drawn to the idea of traditionalism because of the symbolic value he associated with historical artifacts, and by way of his preconception of life in a traditional Chinese neighborhood. These two examples work well together, because while Teacher Hu's refusal to incorporate the modern lifestyle asserts a sense of traditionalism as a survival strategy, Rob's traditionalism represents the ways in which embodying the "past" can be a financial boon to a community.

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